Week 13: *Genesis 47:13-31*

**Hook**

Main Point: God puts some of His people in positions of power, even secular power, using them to accomplish His will.

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Teacher, break your Bible Fellowship into small groups and ask them, “If your resources were unlimited, what problem in the world would you tackle and how would you do it?” When the groups have had a few moments to formulate their answers and strategies, ask them to share with the Bible Fellowship as a whole.

**Q:** What caused you to choose the problem that you chose?

**Q:** What prohibits us from taking action to bless others?

**Q:** Whom in your life have you seen use their position, gifts and resources to bless others?
Week 13: *Genesis 47:13-31*

**Book**

**Main Point:** God puts some of His people in positions of power, even secular power, using them to accomplish His will.

**Text Summary:** The famine continues to be severe. All of Egypt and Canaan spend all of their money buying grain from Joseph. So he takes their livestock as payment for the grain. Then the Egyptians sell their land and themselves as servants to Pharaoh for the grain – all but the priests who had a regular allotment of grain from Pharaoh. Joseph gives them seed to plant and tells them that from now on, a fifth of everything they harvest will belong to Pharaoh. The people agree to live in bondage to Pharaoh rather than die. This becomes a law in all of Egypt, that a fifth of all produce belongs to Pharaoh. Meanwhile, the Israelites settle in Goshen, acquire property, and are fruitful and increase in number. Jacob lives 17 more years in Egypt, to be 147 years old. When Jacob is about to die, he makes Joseph swear to bury him in Canaan, not in Egypt.

*Genesis 47:13-26* [Read]

**Talking Point 1:** God puts some of His people in positions of power to help others.

**Q:** Why did Joseph get to make all of these decisions on his own?

**Q:** How did Joseph grow Pharaoh’s wealth and power?

**Q:** How did the Egyptians feel about Joseph, even as they were made servants of Pharaoh? Why did they feel this way?

Slowly, step by step, through this story, Joseph made all of the Egyptians into servants of Pharaoh. Yet, at the end of this passage, instead of complaining that he was a tyrant, they praised him as their savior (v. 25).¹ The Egyptians considered themselves lucky to be alive. From one perspective, Joseph’s actions may seem as if he were taking advantage of the Egyptians’ desperation. Pharaoh did become very wealthy through this process. At the same time, Joseph’s methods actually saved the people, and even gave them the ability to produce food for themselves. In the end, they thanked Joseph for saving them and willingly committed themselves to serving Pharaoh.²

This is very typical of how and why people in the ancient world sold themselves into indentured servanthood. In the ancient Near East, this kind of relationship was called a suzerain-vassal treaty. The more powerful party—the suzerain—would offer an alliance to the weaker party—
the vassal. Something like, “I will protect you from your enemies with my huge army and give you this plot of land to work. You will give me a percentage of your crops and herds and your sons to serve in my army.” Because of his status as the stronger party, the suzerain’s offering was considered an act of grace and generosity. The vassal would agree no matter what the stipulations of the covenant, because the protection and provision from the king were worth whatever the cost. On his own strength, a vassal could never provide for his family or protect them from his enemies. Offering yourself as a servant to a benevolent master was better than being on your own.iii

Joseph was gracious, kind and fair. He didn’t ask for the Egyptians’ livestock as payment until they had run out of money (v. 16). Then he didn’t ask for their land until they had run out of livestock (v. 19). This wasn’t slavery, it was a voluntary suzerain/vassal treaty.

Joseph also didn’t keep any of this money for himself, he brought it all to Pharaoh’s palace (v. 14). He only asked the people for a fifth of their produce as payment to Pharaoh, which means they got to keep four-fifths for themselves (v. 24). Twenty percent was not an unusual amount of taxation in the ancient world.iv An unfair or harsh taskmaster man would have demanded much more.v The Egyptians themselves had a positive view of Joseph and the whole arrangement with Pharaoh:

- You have saved our lives (v. 25)
- May it please my lord (v. 25)
- We will be servants to Pharaoh (v. 25)

Joseph didn’t take advantage of the Egyptians’ situation. He created a mutually beneficial relationship between the Egyptians and Pharaoh. From a political perspective, he actually strengthened their entire kingdom by creating bonds of loyalty between the people and Pharaoh. The relationship that came from a suzerain-vassal treaty was stronger than just a political alliance. The culture saw the relationship in terms of family—the suzerain wasn’t just a master; he became a father to the vassal. Joseph made this relationship a law in Egypt (v. 26). Their entire kingdom would now be more unified, stronger and prosperous because Joseph had created an economic, military, political system that would benefit them all.vi

Because Joseph was the one in authority over them at the time, the Egyptians were treated with justice and righteousness. If it had been a harsher leader, who knows what kind of deal he would have struck? But Joseph came up with a solution that both saved the lives of the Egyptians and pleased Pharaoh. Because God had put a man such as Joseph in that position of leadership, all of Egypt prospered, not just the rich and powerful.

God puts some of His people in positions of leadership in the secular world today, too. He puts believers in political office to work for policies that serve justice and righteousness. He puts
believers in positions of leadership in the business world to use godly principles in their business practices. He puts believers in influential positions in the film, TV and music industries. He puts believers in leadership positions in schools and communities and hospitals and courtrooms. If God has put you in a position of leadership in the secular world, your goal must not be to grow your glory or fame or to build your own wealth. Allow God to use you to help bless others, to fight injustice, to be sure that people aren’t exploited, but are treated with kindness and respect. Use your influence and authority for good. Godly leaders are servant leaders, seeing their purpose as blessing others, not themselves.

Q: How can you bless others in whatever position God has placed you in your community? How can you use whatever power and authority you have been given to do good in the world?

Q: Read Micah 6:8. How can you use whatever position God has put you in to do justice and love mercy?

Genesis 47:27-28 [READ]

Talking Point 2: God keeps His promises to His people.

While the Egyptians were losing their land and selling themselves into indentured servanthood to Pharaoh, the Israelites were settling in Goshen, acquiring property and being fruitful and increasing in number (v. 27). Joseph helped the Egyptians survive, but he helped the Israelites thrive.

Remember Joseph had developed this plan for his family, to settle in Goshen, and remain relatively independent of the rest of Egypt. They settled in Goshen, the best of the land, which had plenty of space and pasture for their flocks to graze. Their flocks were fruitful (v. 27), whereas the Egyptians had to sell off their livestock for grain (vv. 16-17). After that initial gift of grain that Pharaoh gave them when they came (47:12), they didn’t have to come back to Pharaoh for grain again. But the Egyptians had to come back to Pharaoh year after year for more grain until they finally asked Joseph for seeds to plant (vv. 13–19). While the Egyptians feared they would die out soon (v. 15, 19), the Israelites increased in number (v. 27).

All of this was to fulfill what God had promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – that He would give them many descendants and bless them, and through them, bless every nation of the earth. God had promised Abraham that He would make His descendants a great nation, and even that He would take them to Egypt to do so (Gen. 15:13–14). Though God took them out of their land, He provided for them. He increased their number and made them fruitful. Genesis even uses the same phrases God had earlier given to Adam and Eve and Noah – “be fruitful and
multiply” (Gen. 1:28; 9:1). Eventually, through the generations, He built Joseph’s family into such a great nation that the Pharaoh of Egypt would become threatened by them (Ex. 1:1–10).

This may remind us of what we established back in the beginning of our study—that God’s promise to work everything for our good is a promise only made to believers. “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28). This promise is for those who love God; it says nothing about those who don’t. Not because God loves them better and so He gives them what they want, but because those who love God are called according to His purpose. Those who love God want His will for their lives, not their own. God will always keep His promises to His people.

Q: What promises have you seen God keep? In the Bible, in other people’s lives, in your own life?

Q: What good is God working in your life, even if it may not seem “good” to you at first, or to the eyes of the world?

Q: How is God using your circumstances to mold you into who He wants you to be?

Q: If we believe that God will always keep His promises to His people, how can that give us hope in the midst of difficult circumstances?

Q: What promises do many people believe are in Scripture but are not really there?

Q: What has God really promised us, in this life and eternally?

Genesis 47:29-31 [Read]
Talking Point 3: God’s people trust in His promises, even when they can’t see the end.

Q: Why would Jacob ask to be buried in Canaan, when neither Canaan nor Egypt is really “his” land?

Q: What might this say about the future of Jacob’s family?

When he first came to Egypt, Jacob was talking as if he were going to die any day (45:28). But Jacob lived even longer in Egypt than anyone expected – 17 more years. This was almost as long as the amount of time Joseph was away from him, so he was able to somewhat make up for some of the time that was lost in his relationship with Joseph.

Though he had said when he came to Egypt that his days had been few and evil (47:9), these last 17 years had been sweet and prosperous. He was with his whole family, reunited, and they were fruitful and multiplying.\[vii\]
Yet, Genesis hints to us that the story doesn’t end there. This may be the sweet happy ending for Jacob, but the story of God and His people will go on from here, through hundreds and hundreds of years. In this story, Jacob asked Joseph to bury him in Canaan, the land of his fathers. He even made him swear by holding his thigh, which was one of the traditional signs of swearing an oath; this action was a sign of promise connected to carrying on the family line. In Genesis 24, the servant of Abraham used it to seal the oath of finding Isaac a wife (24:9). It was also a sign of submission to the authority of the person to whom you are swearing the oath.

This would have made sense from an earthly perspective. He wanted to be buried with his family, which was the norm. Once a family tomb was built, it was traditional for each subsequent family member to be buried together. This tied the generations together and strengthened a family’s claim to the area where their ancestors were buried.

But it also had theological significance. Genesis is pointing us forward to the future of Israel that lies in Canaan. Jacob’s family is in Egypt now, and they will be for another 400 years. If we were reading Genesis straight through, and had been paying attention during God’s covenant with Abraham (15:13–14), we would know they would be in Egypt for 400 years and eventually they themselves would be enslaved to Pharaoh, but not in the kind way that Joseph treated the Egyptians here. They would be treated harshly, beaten, barely given enough food to eat, much less able to keep 80 percent of their produce and only taxed 20 percent. But God would rescue them out of Egypt and bring them back to Canaan. God would use this time in their history to grow them into a mighty nation, but this was not their home. Their future lay in the Promised Land.

So Genesis points us ahead to what is to come for God’s people. Jacob knows the promises, and he trusts in the promises of God. God promised Jacob personally before he went to Egypt that He would go to Egypt with his family and make them a great nation there, and He would also bring them back again (46:1–4). By asking to be buried in Canaan, Jacob is trusting in the promises of God, even though they are far off and he can’t see them. Those promises for his family won’t even happen for 400 years, but he still trusts in them. Because God made the promise, and God is trustworthy. On one hand, Jacob got his “happy ending” in this life. On the other hand, the full happy ending was still very, very far off. But he trusted in the Lord and His promises.

Q: How can looking back on your life, to see what God has done for you in the past, give you hope for the future?

Q: How can we know what God’s promises are? How do we find them?

Q: Why can we trust in God’s promises? What makes Him trustworthy?
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**Took**

**Main Point:** God puts some of His people in positions of power, even secular power, using them to accomplish His will.

Consider the way in which Joseph provided for his brothers, for his father. As a group, brainstorm a need in your community and potential ways in which your group might contribute to meeting that need this week, in the next month and in the next year.

**CHALLENGES:**

**THINK: What Are God’s promises, really?** – So many people misunderstand God’s blessings because they misunderstand God’s promises. They have heard people make statements that aren’t really in Scripture or they have just thought, “Oh, God loves me, so obviously He’ll do x, y, z for me.” When we hear statements about God or His promises, we must always check them by what He actually says in Scripture. Spend some time this week researching what God’s promises actually are.

**PRAY: For trust** – Ask God to help you trust His promises. To have a clear idea of what they really are, so you’re not putting a false hope in something that isn’t really true. But that, having a clear picture of the wonderful promises of God, you can trust in Him to care for you, to provide for you, and to bless you in the way that you need it, as only He can truly know.

**ACT: Use your position to help** – God puts people in positions of leadership not for their own fame, wealth and glory, but to help those in need. Maybe you aren’t in a high position in your company or your community, but you can still think through how you can help others in whatever position you find yourself. How can you use your role in your work to help someone beneath you, or a coworker, or even your boss? How can you use your role in the community to help those in need? How can you use your role at the church to help others?

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ii *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).


v *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).


ix *ESV*